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## BEAUTYHEALTHFITNESS

# THE NO-HAIR DISEASE

BY JULIE OLSON

Sweat isn't something people talk about, other than in passing reference to our hot, humid summer days. However, I sweat—a lot. Being a landscape designer, most days of the week will find me not just in my office designing gardens, but at the garden center, in a yard, digging, planting. Most

for me when I was 6 years old, when small patches of hair would mysteriously disappear from my head. It's an autoimmune disorder, similar in process to lupus or rheumatoid arthritis. My immune system (white blood cells) attacks the hair follicles, like they are an enemy. There are many remedies, such as Rogaine, but no cure. Throughout adolescence, my hair



days I am out in the heat and humidity.

But I have a rare, hidden reason for the drips of sweat coming down my forehead, into my eyes, and down the back of my neck. You see, I am bald. I have no hair to mop up the sweat, no eyebrows to keep the sweat from dripping into my eyes. No eyelashes to keep out dust and debris. And the wig that I wear is hot.

I have a condition called Alopecia areata, affecting about 1.7 percent of the population, or about 5 million people in the United States. It can start at any time in one's life, even in adulthood. It is not race- or gender-specific. It started

grew in, then it fell out. My Mother tried to hide the bald spots by combing my remaining hair this way and that, using decorative clips to keep it in place. Needless to say, that really didn't fool anyone. Finally, when I was 13, all my hair fell out. I wore a wig throughout high school, enduring nasty comments and stupid questions.

In my mid-twenties, my eyebrows fell out, and then my eyelashes. I endured cortisone injections in my eyebrow/eyelash area, which, although they worked for awhile, were very, very painful. I cried the day the doctor told me he wouldn't give me the injections

anymore because it was no use. The disease had progressed to total body hair loss, called Alopecia universalis. The doctor said I would probably live with this my entire life.

I resigned myself to wearing the wig and having no eyebrows or eyelashes, and hid my condition from the world, even though it was right in front of everyone. When I would tell friends about it, they would say, "I never knew that wasn't your real hair!" It made me feel good that I could disguise the fact that I wore a wig. I told very few people. All that changed recently, all because of sweat.

Last year, I decided to give up my office job and become a landscape designer, and opened my own business, Serendipity Garden Design. I am constantly seeing clients, designing gardens, being outside.

The wig is very hot, even though its mesh design makes you think it would be nice and cool. When I meet clients, I am constantly wiping my brow. One client took pity on me and handed me a paper towel. Once I was giving a presentation to a client, and dripped sweat on the design. Talk about embarrassing.

The wig has its other drawbacks too. For example, I don't ride rollercoasters. Windy days scare me. When doing abdominal crunches at the gym I am concentrating less on the exercise and more on the fact that my wig might fall off in front of my trainer. I have had almost 30 years of being afraid. It's hard to break the habit.

The National Alopecia Areata Foundation ([www.naaf.org](http://www.naaf.org)) comments that although the condition is not life-threatening, Alopecia areata is most certainly life-altering, and its sudden onset, recurrent episodes, and unpredictable course have a profound psychological impact on the lives of those disrupted by this disease. But I am not sick, I am not contagious. It's just different. I was fine hiding it from the world, as no one could see the "real" me. Until I started to sweat. So, I am breaking my silence, and telling the world: I am a bald gardener. I am a bald woman.

We have hair to carry the sweat off our heads, and eyebrows to divert sweat from our eyes. I recently started wearing a bandanna, a good solution to the sweat-in-the-eyes problem. I wear sunglasses, to keep dirt and debris from my lash-less eyes.

So when I am planting flowers in your yard, please ignore my sweat. Perhaps instead offer me a glass of water on a hot, humid, Washington summer day. ■



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